

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional European Penetration into India

Paper 2 · Unit 1

Portuguese, Dutch, French and English companies and the contest for India: 30 marks in four years, and the prologue to the whole of Paper 2.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

European penetration into India: the early European settlements; the Portuguese and the Dutch; the English and the French East India Companies; their struggle for supremacy; Carnatic Wars; Bengal, the conflict between the English and the Nawabs of Bengal; Siraj and the English; the Battle of Plassey; significance of Plassey.

The early settlements

Four European powers arrived within a century and a half of one another, and the differences in their organisation explain the outcome better than any difference in ambition.

- **Portuguese** arrived first with Vasco da Gama at Calicut in 1498, built the Estado da India from Goa after 1510, and operated a state enterprise of forts, fleets and licences rather than a trading company.
- **Dutch VOC**, chartered in 1602 as the world's first joint-stock company with permanent capital, concentrated on the spice monopoly in the archipelago and used Indian textiles chiefly as currency to buy spices.
- **English East India Company**, chartered on 31 December 1600, established a factory at **Surat in 1613** after Hawkins and Sir Thomas Roe's embassy, and built Madras from 1639, Bombay from 1661 and Calcutta from 1690.
- **French Compagnie des Indes Orientales**, founded in 1664 under Colbert, established **Pondicherry in 1674** and Chandernagore, and remained a state enterprise dependent on royal subsidy.
- **Danish** and **Austrian Ostend** companies were minor and are worth a single mention, since Tranquebar and Serampore appear occasionally in the records.
- **Organisational difference** is the analytical point: the English company was a private joint-stock enterprise answerable to shareholders, while the Portuguese and French were state ventures whose fortunes followed metropolitan politics.
- That difference proved decisive in the eighteenth century, since French Indian policy could be reversed by a change of ministry in Paris while the English company pursued a continuous commercial logic.

The Anglo-French contest and the Carnatic Wars

Asked in 2023 and 2025. Both questions treat the French as having been eliminated, and the interesting work is explaining why.

- **Dupleix**, Governor of Pondicherry from 1742, pioneered the practice of renting European-trained sepoy troops to Indian claimants in return for territory and revenue, which is the technique the English then perfected.
- **First Carnatic War**, 1746 to 1748, was an extension of the Austrian Succession war, and the French captured Madras before returning it at Aix-la-Chapelle in exchange for Louisbourg.
- **Battle of St Thome in 1746**, where a small French force defeated a much larger army of the Nawab of Carnatic, demonstrated the effectiveness of disciplined infantry with artillery and was widely noticed.
- **Second Carnatic War**, 1749 to 1754, was fought through rival claimants in the Carnatic and Hyderabad, and **Robert Clive's** defence of Arcot in 1751 established his reputation.
- **Dupleix's recall** in 1754 by a French government unwilling to fund the enterprise is the single clearest illustration of the state-versus-company difference.

- **Third Carnatic War**, 1756 to 1763, coincided with the Seven Years War, and the French defeat at **Wandiwash in 1760** by Eyre Coote settled the contest.
- **Treaty of Paris in 1763** restored French settlements as unfortified trading posts without troops, which ended France as a political power in India.
- For the 2023 and 2025 questions, the qualification worth making is that the French were defeated as much by **metropolitan decisions and naval inferiority** as by anything that happened in India, and Dupleix's recall and the loss of sea control are the evidence.

The English and the Nawabs of Bengal

Bengal was the richest province and the conflict there was commercial before it was military.

- **Farrukhsiyar's farman of 1717** granted the Company duty-free trade in Bengal for an annual payment, and the **dastak** issued under it became the source of every subsequent dispute.
- Abuse was systematic, since Company servants used the dastak for their **private trade** and sold it to Indian merchants, which deprived the Nawab of customs revenue and undercut Indian competitors.
- **Alivardi Khan**, ruling from 1740, contained the Company by pressure and negotiation while dealing with repeated Maratha bargi raids, and he warned his successor about the Europeans.
- **Siraj-ud-Daula** succeeded in April 1756 as a young man facing rivals within his own family, notably Ghaseti Begum and Shaukat Jang, which weakened his position from the outset.
- Immediate causes of conflict were the Company's **fortification of Calcutta without permission** in anticipation of war with France, its refusal to stop abusing the dastak, and its sheltering of a fugitive from the Nawab.
- **Siraj took Calcutta in June 1756**, and the episode later called the Black Hole was used to justify reconquest, though the reported figures are almost certainly inflated and were disputed even at the time.
- **Company servants** grew rich through private trade and presents rather than through salary, and the resulting fortunes made in Bengal produced the nabob controversy in Britain and eventually parliamentary regulation.
- **Bankers and merchants** turned against Siraj, and the **Jagat Seths**, Omichand and Rai Durlabh all had commercial reasons to prefer a more accommodating Nawab.

Plassey and its significance

Asked in 2024 through the mercenary who became kingmaker. The battle matters far less than the conspiracy that produced it.

- **Plassey, 23 June 1757**, lasted a few hours and involved little serious fighting, since **Mir Jafar** held the bulk of the Nawab's army out of the engagement under a prior agreement with Clive.
- The conspiracy was arranged through the **Jagat Seths** and the merchant **Omichand**, whom Clive then defrauded with a forged treaty, an episode that damaged Clive's reputation in Britain.
- That is precisely what the 2024 quotation means: the Company's military force, hired and paid for, discovered it could **select the ruler**, and the bankers who financed Bengal preferred a client to an antagonist.

- **Immediate consequences** were the installation of Mir Jafar, the transfer of the twenty four parganas to the Company, and enormous personal payments to Clive and other Company servants.
- **Plunder** followed on a scale that damaged the Bengal economy directly, and the outflow of bullion after 1757 reverses the earlier flow of silver into India.
- **Mir Qasim**, installed in 1760, tried to restore the Nawab's position by abolishing internal duties altogether in 1763 so that Indian merchants would compete on equal terms, and he was removed for it.
- **Buxar, 22 October 1764**, is the militarily decisive battle, defeating Mir Qasim, Shuja-ud-Daula of Awadh and the emperor Shah Alam II together, and it settled what Plassey had only opened.
- **Significance** to argue: Plassey gave the Company the political leverage and the revenue of Bengal, and the Bengal revenue then financed every subsequent conquest, so 1757 is the hinge on which the whole of Paper 2 turns.

Why the English prevailed

Close with explanation rather than narrative, since every question in this unit is finally about causation.

- **Naval supremacy** allowed reinforcement and movement between Bengal, Madras and Bombay, and denied the same to the French after 1759.
- **Financial structure** mattered decisively, since a joint-stock company with permanent capital and access to the London money market could sustain losses that a royal enterprise could not.
- **Indian collaboration** was essential rather than incidental, and bankers, merchants, revenue officials and sepoys all participated for their own reasons.
- **Continuity of purpose** across changes of governor distinguished the Company from the French, whose policy shifted with ministries in Paris.
- **Parliamentary supervision** after the Regulating Act of 1773 and Pitt's India Act of 1784 gave the enterprise institutional durability rather than dependence on individuals.
- **Indian political fragmentation** created the openings, but it does not by itself explain why the English exploited them and the French did not, which is the distinction a good answer draws.
- **Dutch decline** in India followed their defeat at **Bedara in 1759** and their concentration on the Indonesian archipelago, so the contest narrowed to two European powers well before it was settled.
- **Contingency** deserves a closing line, since the outcome was not obvious to contemporaries and the Company came close to serious defeat in 1780 against Mysore and the Marathas simultaneously.

Last-mile revision

- Gama 1498, Estado da India from Goa 1510; VOC 1602; EIC chartered 31 December 1600, Surat 1613, Madras 1639, Bombay 1661, Calcutta 1690; French 1664 and Pondicherry 1674.
- Carnatic Wars 1746-48, 1749-54, 1756-63; St Thome 1746; Arcot 1751; Dupleix recalled 1754; Wandiwash 1760; Paris 1763.
- Farrukhsiyar's farman 1717 and the dastak; Alivardi from 1740; Siraj from April 1756; Calcutta taken June 1756.
- Plassey 23 June 1757 with Mir Jafar, Jagat Seths and Omichand; Mir Qasim abolishes duties 1763; Buxar 22 October 1764.

Common errors to avoid

- Describing Plassey as a battle won by superior arms. It was decided by a prior agreement with Mir Jafar and by banker support.
- Treating the Black Hole figures as established. They were inflated and were disputed contemporaneously.
- Saying the French were defeated purely in India. Dupleix's recall and the loss of naval control were metropolitan decisions.
- Forgetting Buxar. It defeated three powers together and produced the diwani, which Plassey did not.
- Explaining English success by Indian disunity alone. That describes the opening; it does not explain who exploited it.

Mains Practice

“During the Carnatic Wars, the French position, which at one time dazzled the Indian world by its political successes, was destined to end in humiliation and failure.” Explain.

20 marks · 250 words · 2025

“Superior maritime strength proved to be England's most powerful weapon in the struggle for colonial supremacy, particularly in the Carnatic Wars.”

10 marks · 150 words · 2026